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Abstract

The complex nature of grammar and its relevance to teaching today are explored in the light of modern linguistics. Reviewing the development and fundamental theory of transformational generative grammar, the author points out its substantial merit and also its failure to be understood as exemplary grammatical analysis of language rather than grammar itself. Final remarks deal with the validity of grammatical rules and the proposal that grammar be considered a subject of study in its own right. (RL)

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Grammar? Today?

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My only previous experience of a CC CC Convention, in April of 1959, was the one when I introduced the theory of transformational grammar at the linguistics workshop. I said, among other things, that the linguistics of Fries, Trager and Smith, Sledd and others (including myself) was significantly inadequate to the task of accounting for many, many aspects of the syntactic behavior of speakers and writers of English, and I tried to show that transformational grammar was *in principle* adequate to this task in important ways that other grammars were not. Now, only four years later, transformational theory has been widely accepted on the same terms as, say, Fries was previously accepted, and it is time for qualifications to be stated again.

The structure of English (or any other language) is vastly more complex than any ancient or contemporary grammar even begins to reveal. I expect it is impossible to exaggerate the extent of this complexity. A very rough measure of the extent of it may be gained by considering the following simple fact: if we have five words, say *A B C D E*, and only one grammatical rule, namely that these five constitute a well-formed sentence in any sequence, then the number of possible sentences is one hundred and twenty. But if we take any five English words, the most sentences we can construct is about half-a-dozen. The difference between this half-dozen and one hundred twenty is a direct function of the inhibiting force of the rules of English grammar. One of the most valuable results of transformational analysis has been to demonstrate the depth of our ignorance about the richness of the grammatical constraints under which we operate as speakers of English. Of course in one sense we all know that English syntax is complex. But knowing it intuitively is quite different from formalizing it precisely. An essential difference between transformational grammar and all others that I know of is the very high degree of explicitness that is built into it.

Let us take one of the best, and most recent, traditional grammars of English that we have, Professor Long's book, *The Sentence and its Parts.* He writes (p. 2):

> Contexts are of extreme importance in our understanding of language. When *they're ready to eat* is spoken in a situation in which it is clear that "they" is some children, they suggests the subject of *eat;* when the same sentence is spoken in a situation in which it is clear that "they" is some baked potatoes, *they* suggests not the subject but the complement of *eat.*

Now who could quarrel with this? It is obviously true. I want to agree with it; at the same time I want to say that it is an inexplicit statement with which I can agree because it is sufficiently vague that an interpretation of it can be

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Mr. Stockwell, a member of the English department at the University of California, Los Angeles, delivered this talk at the Spring, 1963, meeting of the CCCC at Los Angeles.

reached only through our intuitive understanding of English Syntax—his statement has not thrown any new light on the question just how the ambiguity is possible in this sentence. He has merely made an accurate observation (in itself, no mean trick) about our intuition: he has said it's ambiguous, and that we have to figure out from context whether *they* is related to *eat* as subject to verb or as object to verb. He has given us the data which, fed into our cranial computers, results in two quite different interpretations, between which a choice can be made, somehow, given adequate context. But he has not answered, explicitly, the two interesting questions: (1) why is it the case that only certain sentences of the form *Noun is Adjective to Verb* are ambiguous in this way? That is, what snytactic rules assign ambiguity in this case but not in others such as *They are ready to vanish?* (2) Just *how* does the context serve to enable us to resolve the ambiguity, once we understand the nature of it? The first question is a syntactic one on which a good deal of light has been thrown in an article by Lees ("A Multiply Ambiguous Adjectival Construction in English," *Languages* 36, 1960). The second one I would prefer not to call a syntactic question at all, since the context need not be linguistic. It is a very proper question, of course, in a language teaching text, where we answer it by guess, by example, and by prayer. We don't know any better way.

Let us take a different kind of statement that was favored a few years ago (they tell me it still is, in some circles, though I find this hard to believe). It was favored, I think, largely because it *was* explicit (unfortunately some of us forgot to ask whether it was also true). Professor Francis, in his *Structure of American English* (1958), defines "sentence" in the following way (p. 372):

> A sentence is as much of the uninterrupted utterance of a single speaker as is included either between the beginning of the utterance and the pause which ends a sentence-final-contour or between two such pauses.

There is nothing wrong with this—it is testable, explicit, simple, etc.—except for the fact that it yields the wrong answer with a remarkably high degree of consistency. It says that all the following are sentences: "Yes." "Ouch." "Leaving already?" "Of now is are don't female the." [Let it be noted that I said each of these with a sentence–final contour followed by pause, and that I am a single speaker, where single is not to be interpreted in the context "matrimony."] Now even if we concede that "Yes," etc. are sentences, a concession I would make only with extensive provisos placed on the concession, I'm sure we'll not concede that "Of now is are don't female the" is a sentence. Is it merely an absurd example? I think not: the whole point of grammatical analysis is to show what constraints exist in a language to inhibit speakers from stringing together any random selection of words that might come to mind. A grammar that fails to show what these constraints are is not a good grammar—it may be a bad grammar, a good fragmentary grammar, or something not related to grammar at all.

I think we must evaluate a fragmentary and inexplicit grammar in which the observations about the internal structure of sentences conform with our intuitive judgment, as being more useful than a fragmentary and occasionally explicit grammar which is counter-intuitive. I have the impression that not only would Professor Long agree with me but also Professor Francis: the quotations above were convenient for my immediate purpose, not chosen for personal attack on either scholar. The point is that we must bring about a marriage of the utmost compatibility between explicitness,

on the one hand, and conformity with our intuition about the structure of English, on the other. And then we must work to eliminate the abjective "fragmentary" that must now be placed before any book title containing the noun "grammar".

What Noam Chomsky has tried to do, it seems, is to formulate precisely the kind of rules which are in principle capable of providing an explicit description of the constraints that characterize the behavior of people when they talk or write. He has shown with the utmost clarity that this is the necessary first step in a general research program of which the ultimate goal is adequate grammars of languages. He has quite naturally chosen to test the adequacy of various rule types on the language he knows best, which is English. Now the measurement of adequacy of rule-types does not depend on coverage of raw data. It depends rather on whether there is a *type* of syntactic structure amenable to explicit description in one way but not in another. Hence nearly all of the published discussion has been exemplification, chosen to show that some English sentence-types clearly lie beyond the inherent limitations of, for example, phrase structure (or immediate constituent) grammar, or to show—as in the case of the published analyses of sentences like "They're ready to eat"—that certain fundamental relationships within English sentences *can* be accounted for by a grammar that contains transformational rules as one of its components.

This technique of exemplification has been rather seriously misunderstood. The fragments of English grammar published for this purpose have not been taken as illustrations of rule types formulated to test their adequacy *as* rule types; they have been taken as grammars of English, thereupon open to attack on the score that many sentences are not covered, or that many ungrammatical sentences *will* be included in the output.

This kind of criticism is not very useful. It implies, for one thing, that merely citing counter-examples proves a rule wrong. There are at least three kinds of counter-examples: (1) those which merely require that the rule be more detailed, with more highly restricted subclasses: such counter-examples help to extend the coverage and accuracy of the rule (the people who contribute such examples so freely might be urged to try their hand at formulating the needed modifications of the rule); (2) those which cannot be included within a rule except by listing them as exceptions (these may be genuine exceptions, which should bother no one as long as they can in fact be listed—or they may suggest a quite different rule formulation); and (3) those which are beyond the capacities of the known rule types, which are the interesting ones, since they pose theoretical problems that must be solved before there is any real possibility of writing a grammar that will measure up to the standards we all want to impose, no matter what particular dogma we espouse.

The criticism provided in the form of counter-examples usually implies something more, however: namely, that since scholar A can find a moth-hole in the coat of scholar B, the coat of scholar A is therefore not in need of repair. The truth is rather more upsetting, I think: though ancient, linguistics is a primitive study. There is some truth in the conviction that we have made headway at a great rate in the last thirty years, but the headway is coming more and more to resemble that of the physicists, who find ever more sub-atomic particles to confound the simplicity and elegance of their 19th century inheritance. The headway has brought us now to the point where we can ask questions about the grammatical structure of lan-

guages that we did not know how to ask before; but the questions multiply much faster than the answers.

I suppose that what I want to say, then, is that "Grammar Today" represents a kind of paradox, a contradiction of terms. The most challenging thinking going on in this field today is about the very nature of grammar itself, the capabilities of various rule types for specifying the sentence-constructing potential of language users. Until the dust settles a bit, a satisfactory grammar is out of the question. And, to my own surprise, I find this an exhilarating state of affairs. I will be unhappy when the day comes that a paper can be written about Grammar Today which allows as how we have one.

But what, then, can we teach? I'm not sure that *anything* we teach about grammar is relevant to the teaching of composition, but grammar is a subject in its own right. It surely is not the case that the various fragmentary grammars are all on a par, and we have to teach the difference between birdies and bogies in grammar. I think we can teach what it is that grammarians seek to do, why they seek to do it, what devices they have tried out, the relative merits of these devices, the criteria by which degrees of adequacy can be measured; we can communicate to our students something of the endless fascination of the problems that keep grammarians at work, generation after generation. We can let them see that it is a discipline worthy of the name, a challenge worthy of the intellect. We can encourage them to examine the regularities of their own speech and writing and help them formalize what they observe. In the end it may turn out to be pertinent to composition in the usual sense, after all.

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